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PROGRAM Morning Edition

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CITY Washington, D.C.

SUBJECT The Beirut Bombing

BOB EDWARDS: President Reagan has appointed a high-level delegation to go to Beirut to honor those killed in Monday's bombing of the U.S. Embassy. The President also has ordered that all flags on U.S. Government buildings be flown at half-staff.

NPR's Ted Clark reports on what an incident like the Beirut bombing means in practical terms for American Foreign Service officers.

TED CLARK: As rescue workers continue to search for victims in the rubble of the embassy, as U.S. officials in Beirut try to resume embassy operations in makeshift quarters, their colleagues in the State Department also have to cope with a deep sense of loss.

ANDREW STEIGMANN: There's an incredible sense of shock that goes through the whole building when you have the kind of event that occurred in Beirut earlier this week. People go around. You see them in small groups in the halls, talking, asking questions, asking about the particular individuals, trying to find out exactly what's been going on and whether the safety of particular people is known.

CLARK: Andrew Steigmann is Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Personnel.

STEIGMANN: I think everyone in the Foreign Service senses that these are shared risks. It's the kind of thing that could happen anywhere, anytime. And we're all going overseas to posts that are potential targets.

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CLARK: Ambassador Steigmann says terrorist incidents like the one in Beirut tend to increase the determination of most Foreign Service officers to carry on with their work.

STEIGMANN: That's a fairly widely held perception in the country. After the Iranian hostage episode, for example, we had a tremendous upsurge in the number of people applying to take the Foreign Service exam, reversing a five-year decline, because, I think, there was a rededication to the idea of service.

CLARK: Foreign Service officers leave their families behind in the States more frequently these days than they used to. But fear of possible terrorist attacks is not the main reason, according to Ambassador Steigmann.

STEIGMANN: The biggest single factor that has discourages families from traveling abroad is the trend to two-income families. Many spouses simply don't want to go abroad where they don't have employment opportunities. And that, interestingly enough, is much more significant today than the terrorist threat. The terrorist threat really applies and scares people off only a handful of posts, whereas the spousal problem is worldwide.

CLARK: When a Foreign Service officer is killed in the line of duty, the State Department tries to offer some help to dependents through an Office of Family Liaison. It has provided jobs for surviving spouses in the past, but recently enacted legislation has made that more difficult.

Overseas, the American staff of an embassy is something like an extended family, and offers moral as well as physical help for dependents when a tragedy occurs. In many ways, this is the strongest support the Foreign Service provides.

But Americans make up only a portion of the staff in any U.S. Embassy. A great deal of the work is done by local employees, known as Foreign Service nationals.

STEIGMAN: In the visa section, for example, almost all of the visa work short of the final decision and signing is done by Foreign Service nationals. In the administrative section, the drivers, the payroll clerks, the typists are going to be nationals of the country. We hire them rather than sending Americans abroad because it's -- one thing, it's much more economical. And these people generally stay with the embassy throughout their careers, and they provide the backbone of embassy operations year-in and year-out. And we've had extremely loyal service from Foreign Service national employees all around the world, even in situations where it has been difficult and dangerous for them to work for the United States.

CLARK: It's feared that up to one-third of the local employees of the American Embassy in Beirut may have been killed by the explosion.